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Critical Review: "Our Lives as Writers: Examining Preservice Teachers' Experiences
and Beliefs about the Nature of Writing and Writing Instruction"

In the article "Our Lives as Writers: Examining Preservice Teachers' Experiences and Beliefs about the Nature of Writing and Writing Instruction," authors Kimberly A. Norman and Brenda H. Spencer report on a study conducted on two sections of preservice teachers at California State University. The article presents the authors' concerns that writing theory and pedagogy instruction is often undermined by the lack of time available to effectively prepare preservice teachers. Since preservice teacher preparation time is limited, Norman and Spencer present what they consider an essential concept for teacher educators, namely, that preservice teacher preparation should include pedagogical events that have been proven to have efficacy through research to make best use of time. The authors then move forward to present their own research, consisting of the use of autobiographical writing in literacy methodology courses, as one such example that is intended to provide research efficacy in preservice teacher education. However, this review will show that while Norman and Spencer are successful in presenting their desire to engage preservice teachers in reflective analysis, their article lacks the needed complexity and transparency to be considered effective pedagogical research.

To begin with, Norman and Spencer present, but never truly analyze, the effect of their participants' demographic base. While the authors explain that fifty-nine preservice teachers took part in this study, they also share that fifty-three of those preservice teachers were women. This is 90% of

their participant pool. Adding to the study's demographic imbalance was the fact that the study involved only Caucasian (69%), Hispanic (19%), and Asian (12%) participants (Norman, & Spencer, 2005). It was disappointing that the authors rushed by the fact that their study reflected the views of only six men and included no African Americans of either gender, although it was conducted in one of the few states that the U.S. Census Bureau credits with an African American population of over one million (www.census.gov). This was one of the first issues in the article that called the authors' *ethos* into consideration. To ignore this issue of demographics, instead of addressing it transparently, Norman and Spencer allow unlike-minded readers an opportunity to level accusations of bias towards the study and their article. This is especially ironic when the authors' contention that preservice teacher preparation should include effective pedagogical research is taken into consideration. Norman and Spencer cannot expect those unlike-minded readers who would challenge their study to ignore this demographic imbalance. Furthermore, they should consider if this lack of transparency may be due to issues of bias, or more appropriately "an opportunity of unlike-minded readers to perceive bias," by their close proximity to the research, students, and data.

In further considering the issue of transparency in the article, it is difficult not to find fault with the authors' strategic choice used to build the platform for their position. Early on, Norman and Spencer attempt to craft a foundation for their study by sharing data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report that presented only 23% of fourth graders and 31% of eighth graders scored proficient in writing in the 2002 national measurement (Norman, & Spencer, 2005). Norman and Spencer follow this data with the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges argument that school reforms haven't done anything of impact to address the inadequacies surrounding writing in our nation's schools, nor made progress in improving preservice teacher education as it relates to writing across the curriculum (Norman, & Spencer, 2005). Sadly, the article ignores the implications and complexities of using these statistics and sources to craft its foundation: they seem to

be referencing standardized test scores and services without admitting that the demographic of students, on a national level, are anything but standard. They also ignore the issue that there are educators, their perceived audience, who do not define school or student achievement by standardized test scores. By presenting data that measures and separates students on a national level, without questioning the efficacy or appropriateness of the standardized testing used to collect the data, nor addressing the viewpoint shared by many educators in their audience that standardized tests may not be a sound measurement of student achievement, Norman and Spencer build the foundation of their study on a Californian fault line. This doesn't seem a sound rhetorical decision. Instead of sharing, with a level of transparency, that not everyone in academia holds the standardized tests as appropriate or effective, but moving forward after addressing the complexity of the issue, the authors once again seem to be ignoring their own bias. Unlike-minded readers will again find an easy target when calling the article to task for attaching its explanation of need, the reasoning behind the study and its self-proclaimed pedagogical success, to the increase of writing proficiency as measured by standardized tests.

As Norman and Spencer link the "need" of their study to the need of increasing test scores, through the inclusion of data like that from the NAEP, and further add the label of effective pedagogy, they offer still another target for the unlike-minded reader to focus. By presenting their study, which will later be shown to require great reflection from its participants, as something to be used as a sound pedagogical strategy in preparing preservice teachers, the authors send a clouded message. By expressing a need to use reflective pedagogy to improve the teaching of writing, which will be measured and validated through test scores, the authors run close to nearly invalidating the pedagogy of their study. Test scores are in their nature, measurements and often seen as evidence. However, pedagogy, in the role it plays in preservice teacher preparation, is not something easily correlated to the performance of students. Pedagogical considerations in preservice teacher training are not easily

attributed as the causal affect to student achievement. As Boyd, et al. point out, “What is most remarkable today is the lack of evidence on the effect of almost any teacher preparation on the performance of students” (Boyd, et al., 2007, p. 59). In fact, criticisms of pedagogical courses often stem from their comparison to content knowledge courses and the implied irrelevancy of pedagogy in that comparison, due to difficulty in measurement (Grossman, 2008). Which begs the question, if future standardized measurements report an increase in student writing proficiency, how would Norman and Spencer prove the correlation from the test score increase to the claims of pedagogical efficacy they present in this study?

This consideration of the authors’ claims of pedagogical efficacy seen in their study, leads readers to carefully consider what the study itself presents. A large portion of the preservice teachers that Norman and Spencer include in the study share their discomfort with corrective feedback on writing assignments when that feedback deals with the word or sentence level concerns in their writing:

48% of the preservice teachers ... reported that receiving instruction and corrective feedback and suggestions about their writing had a negative effect on their self-concepts as writers. This was especially true when the feedback dealt with grammar, syntax, or spelling, but also occurred when comments were made about word choice, clarity, and support for ideas.

(Norman, & Spencer, 2005, p. 33)

Thus, the authors attempt to show the seeking out of their students’ reflections of past writing commentary and experiences as an effective pedagogical choice that would, apparently, lead preservice teachers to consider the feedback they engage students with in their future classrooms. Norman and Spencer seem to be attempting to allow students to engage with and learn from their own past experiences, to affect their future choices as teachers. Pedagogically, this echoes of McLaren’s exploration of Freire, “The world must be approached as an object to be understood and known by the

efforts of the learners themselves. Moreover, their acts of knowing are to be stimulated and grounded in their own being, experiences, needs, circumstances, and destinies” (McLaren, 2000, p. 11).

Yet, even in this consideration, Norman and Spencer find responses in their own study that contradict the sentiments echoed against sentence level feedback. “Of the 68% [of preservice teachers] who described the effect of writing instruction on their views of themselves as writers, 34% believed that it had played a positive role. These preservice teachers described how corrective feedback and instruction in using descriptive language, and brainstorming techniques helped them grow as writers” (Norman, & Spencer, 2005, p. 33). I wonder if this was an attempt by the authors to develop an *ethos* in their writing by showing conflicting findings, or finally allowing some transparency in their study. It seems justified that unlike-minded readers would easily point to the conflicting responses in the study and cry fault, even though the conflicting responses came from the preservice teaching students. And that consideration presents a fact that may be Norman and Spencer’s greatest misstep in the complexity of their article: They studied their students’ work from a semester in which they were involved with the students in a grade-related environment and ignored the complexity this may have had on the adequacy of the source data.

Students often develop the idea early in education that success in the classroom is less about learning than it is about the production of grades through assimilation. This concept is echoed in the work of many scholars, but often directed at the marginalized or oppressed. Yet consider the plight of the student who is both trying to become a professional educator, by navigating uncertain waters, and also trying to give their teacher whatever he or she may want to earn favor, praise, and a passing grade. This, for far too many students, is a strategy learned early in education, “Increasingly, young black people are encouraged by the dominant culture (and by those black people who internalize the values of this hegemony) to believe that assimilation is the only possible way to survive, to succeed” (hooks, 1998, p. 52). While hooks was referring to the plight of the young black person, her sentiment can be

seen in various situations where students feel they must assimilate to succeed. It was ironic that hooks' concept explained the student strategy of assimilation as it references black students, which this study managed to silence through exclusion. The bottom line of this issue is that Norman and Spencer never show any consideration in their article that their preservice teachers may, on any level, be engaging in a performance of "grade-grubbing" during the study.

Consider, the authors chose the assignment without student input, and before giving students an attempt to find their way through the assignment, to carve their own path, Norman and Spencer gave them a successful example. This is the pedagogy they seek to deliver to the masses or preservice teachers to raise standardized test scores? I question this choice. The authors explain that after being shown the example, engaging in pre-writing activities, and reflecting on their experiences, students then composed their writing autobiographies over the next week (Norman, & Spencer, 2005, p. 28). It seems ironic they chose the word "composed" due to its flexible use. We assume they used it in the verb form, but what does it imply about student assimilation in their study if "composed" is considered in its adjective form? Instead of creating the autobiography, the students would have been calming or taming the autobiography to match the example presented and grub for a successful grade. This is not effective pedagogy. This is yet another target for unlike-minded readers to call to task. In ignoring the effect they may have had on the data production and collection by performing their tasks as teachers, Norman and Spencer have further damaged the rhetoric of their paper by ignoring an obvious hole in their *logos*. Since no dialogue was presented in which the authors explain the steps they attempted to take to have little-to-no effect on the outcome of the study, readers can only assume the authors ignored their effect and the effect grading may have played on the study. It's as if the authors expected their preservice teachers to cast aside years of competitive nature and status stratification based on notions of grades and success that developed both implicitly and explicitly through years of classroom experiences (Kincheloe, 2008).

In closing, Norman and Spencer reminded readers of four themes that emerged from the preservice teachers' autobiographical responses in this study. These included a positive image from good feedback, enjoyment for creative writing over expository writing, what makes writing teachers good, and the perceived value students have for writing and teaching writing. Sadly, the authors based these themes on a study that left itself an easy target for unlike-minded readers. This article has proven that Norman and Spencer do not fulfill their purpose shared at the outset of their article: to have effective research, based in sound pedagogy that has an impact on preservice teacher preparation by ignoring the complexities of the issue and avoiding dealing with these complexities in a transparent manner.

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